



On the Level:

What the Pros Think of YouthBuild

stretch on too long, raising the carrying costs. The housing subsidy isn't deep enough to pay for the learning curve job after job, and we're all well aware of the deep cuts in job training funds over the last decade.

In the competitive environment for housing dollars, savvy developers have learned that they do better when they run lean on the social service component, since the brownie points they earn for community participation, resident services, or on-the-job training programs don't offset the scoring points they earn for tight pro-formas. This is especially true of tax-credit programs, where the syndicator is chomping at the bit for quick completion schedules, and is given no meaningful incentive to do anything in the community besides the real estate transaction.

Some groups have tried it on a trial basis, with pieced-together programs, and had bad results. And word gets around. Others have done it successfully, but haven't been able to sustain funding over the long haul.

Last week, I met the YouthBuild kids of our new affiliate, **Chautauqua Home Rehabilitation and Improvement Corporation** of Mayville, New York, and toured their jobsite at 711 Main in nearby Dunkirk, and I'd have to say they're doing it as well as I've seen it.

The keys are great program design, layering subsidies, and getting good partners. Start with a HUD YouthBuild grant and access to HUD's \$1 Sale to Municipalities prop-

BY JACK JENSEN AND ARMAND MAGNELLI

In the interest of providing better service to our industry, and increasing the collaboration between our organizations, "On The Level" has added Armand Magnelli of The Enterprise Foundation as a partner. We will try co-authoring columns for a while and see how it goes.

Q: "What is the status of YouthBuild in the New York District? Is it working? Which groups are doing it well?"
—Highly Placed Neighborhood Reinvestment Person

A: **Jack replies:** Dear Highly Placed, YouthBuild is a great concept. I constantly hear contractors gripe that they can't get good help, and I constantly hear social service agencies complain that they're inundated with young people who need something constructive (pun intended) to do. It seems on the surface to be the ultimate no-brainer.

Virtually every community has housing needs and young people who need job skills, and we've got nonprofits with funding mechanisms and organizational capacity to do housing. So why not put them all together? It makes so much sense anyone could write the photo-op copy in their sleep, right?

Well, sometimes it works. Sometimes it doesn't. It turns out that mixing job training with tight-budgeted affordable housing is darn tricky. The jobs

erties. Sprinkle in some CDBG rehab and home-ownership subsidies. Add a \$150,000 line of credit from M&T Bank, some Affordable Housing Corporation money, and some help from the Workforce Investment Board, and you've got a substantial program base. They took on some



beauties, so of course they're doing complete gut-rehabs, which provides a good learning lab for the kids.

Outside contractors had to de-mold one house, but they assembled a crew of 18- to 24-year-olds with a full-time crew leader, and are marching through their target area.

Two teams of kids switch between GED and other tailored classes half a day, and on-site construction the other half-day. Through a partnership with a local youth employment provider and a local New York State Board of Cooperative Education Services (which does vocational training), they get a good mix of help with other issues in their lives besides a lack of job skills.

The kids were painting and trimming when I toured, and there was a big stack of identical toolboxes, nailbags, hardhats, and four-foot levels in the living room, which the kids get to keep upon graduation, courtesy of a donation from the Northern Chautauqua Community Foundation. Nextel donated walkie-talkies for jobsite safety and communication back with the training center. DFT Communications offered a discounted security system to help secure the house and tools.

The kids are paid from between minimum wage and \$7.50 an hour, and they decide on the requirements for raises. They're actively involved in the management of the program, and have selected representatives to attend the New York State YouthBuild coalition to help with their legislative information days. They've all been certified as lead-safe workers. Here are their stories.

Angel, lean and tough-looking, has three kids and had been living in a van prior to entering the program. He hopes to make good money at a union job, and would like to learn to work on a new house.

Edmee, who is petite and sassy, had a tough home life. At age 21, she has given birth to two children that died. She has decided that she may be a little too small for a lifetime occupation in construction, but she is learning valuable skills she can apply to her real dream, which is to become an interior decorator. She has struggled with math in the past but found that construction math came easy, and that has turned on a light

bulb. She could overcome something if she puts her mind to it.

Jennifer, mother of one, was left here to fend for herself when her mother was deported. Her father is thousands of miles away. She never knew how to hold a hammer, but has learned that she doesn't need a man in her life to fix her house. She can do it herself if she wants. She likes the steady paycheck, too.

Matt, another rugged young character with a whimsical smile, learned a little bit of construction from his dad and wants to build on that knowledge to make a better life. He's anxious to get his GED and get moving to the next step.

Eric, who reportedly used to be the shyest person you can imagine, is now a bundle of verbal energy and good humor. He said he needed to get straightened out from some drinking problems and take his life in a new direction. He loves making something tangible with his hands, and uses terms like "leadership" and "self-esteem" easily and naturally when he talks about his future.

The project looks great, of course, and history says about one-third of these kids will find permanent jobs in the construction industry. Another third will build from this positive experience and go on to something different, with success. And another third may continue to struggle.

As I listened to their stories, I tried not to guess who would make it and who wouldn't. John Murphy, the brains behind this project, says the biggest lesson he's learned is to take the time to recruit kids who have the right mix of motivation and ability to stick it out. In addition, his advice was: "Plan, plan, plan. You need great committed instructors and counselors, and a well-designed curriculum. And, of course, you need to be just a little bit crazy and not afraid to put in some time."

Despite the "herding kittens" aspect of the program and frequent disappointments with lack of moti-

vation, poor attendance, and crisis management for the kids, Murphy said he was very pleased and proud of the program and the kids. "It's a great program," he said, "and I want to do it all over again as soon as I can."

But, of course, you get that energy from these kids. They're the key to



A western New York group at its job site.

PHOTOS BY JACK JENSEN

the whole puzzle. Anybody who meets them would support them. So I think we need to focus on getting that story out there, starting here.

Those are my starting thoughts. You know my style is to rely on smart colleagues to do most of my thinking for me, so I called on Armand Magnelli from The Enterprise Foundation.

Armand adds: I would echo your first two paragraphs. I'm enamored by the concept of YouthBuild, partially because I really like the idea of using construction work as a medium for teaching good work habits. The combination of classroom and hands-on learning is also a winner, and not only because I like to learn that way. It's based on sound learning curriculum design. I imagine that many organizations would like to consider the program as an option.

I'm not in a position to comment on YouthBuild in New York, but I do

have some opinions about YouthBuild generally (surprise, surprise) that I'm willing to share, based on my knowledge of a few YouthBuild programs.

From my perspective as a former director of a community development corporation, I think of YouthBuild as a potentially complex yet rewarding business line for organizations doing affordable housing development. I'll separate some components of the program as I see it:

- ▶ **Job Readiness** – Great tool for giving people the opportunity to experience some success in an employment situation. It's a protected environment, but with clear rules and policies on job performance. This requires staff with skills and experience in employment services, and with an understanding of how to enable success.

- ▶ **Skill Training** – Different people learn in different ways. Providing multiple environments for a blended learning strategy is excellent. The importance of this component is not so much learning skills in construction (which are very valuable, and add to general self-sufficiency), but having success in a learning environment. This component requires staff with construction experience, training experience (including classroom and on-the-job), and a huge amount of patience and skill at project management.

- ▶ **Housing Development** – I don't think that it's particularly useful or appropriate to focus on or promote YouthBuild as an affordable-housing development program. I think that having a completed building is a wonderful benefit, but the standard performance measures for housing-development programs (cost per square foot, time to completion, volume, and so on), would often be unkind measures for a YouthBuild project.

At the risk of starting a long conversation with existing and potential programs, here are my favorite YouthBuild program-design criteria:

1. The students would experience a deliberate progression of hands-on construction experiences, starting with jobs requiring less skill and moving to tasks requiring more skill. An example would be to have the students on a housing-rehabilitation project follow this progression of tasks: selective demolition, rough framing, wall and ceiling finishes, finish carpentry, and painting.

While I would want the participants to have some exposure to mechanical trades (electrical, plumbing, HVAC), I don't see the need to build skills in those areas. This approach would give the participant a good sense of how people improve their skills within a company, serving apprenticeships of a sort. It would also be easier

for the instructors to enable success at each stage.

2. The classroom/hands-on experience would use the metaphor of construction work to teach a number of standard business skills and concepts. Measuring, cost estimating, and bookkeeping for math skills. Correspondence, job files, and reports in general for reading and writing skills. Job scenarios for the concepts of business contracts, business ethics, marketing, sales, personnel management, and business planning. There are also numerous life-skill learning opportunities, like environmental issues, home maintenance repairs, and home maintenance budgeting that can be built into the curriculum.

3. Real subcontractors and general contractors would be heavily involved in classroom training and in the on-site experience. This would give the students a real-life perspective on how people work, and perhaps, on occasion, make a connection for future employment.

Jack closes: Well, let me add my three-cents worth:

- ▶ **Counseling is key.** As Murphy notes, "These kids are often dealing so much with family, social, court, housing and other issues, they need that supportive element and the advocacy of a dedicated counselor. I think one of the things that made our start-up a success was the incredible patience of the managing partner."

- ▶ **Partnership (surprise!) is also critical:** "The city of Dunkirk deserves so much of the credit for making this program successful," Murphy said. "They receive and turn over the HUD houses to CHRIC. They allocated CDBG funds for hard-dollar construction costs. They discount the property taxes for the 'construction year'. They allocated other supportive neighborhood reinvestment funds for sidewalk replacement and tree planting. They support our applications to HUD and other funders."

- ▶ **You don't have to do it in a vacuum.** There are lots of groups with lots of experience that all operate under the YouthBuild umbrella.

For more resources on YouthBuild, check out the Web site for YouthBuild USA (www.youthbuild.org), the national nonprofit support center and intermediary for the YouthBuild movement.

Hope this was helpful!

JJ and AM ■

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